

The Prophetic History of the Roman Empire

George N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, Kregal Pub., 1988.

Emphasis the author's throughout.

The Roman Empire when divided into its Eastern and Western divisions, and when ruled over by several emperors conjointly, was still regarded as one great whole.

Many writers have taken it for granted that when the Western head fell in the person of Augustulus (deposed about A.D. 476), the Roman Empire became entirely extinct in the West. But history rejects such a conclusion, seeing that the Roman senate acknowledged the Emperorship of Zeno at Constantinople, declaring that, "The Majesty of a sole monarch is sufficient to pervade and to protect at the same time both the East and the West" etc. (Gibbon's *Decl. and Fall*, ch. 37).

The West on various occasions, in the most public manner, received the decrees, etc., of the emperor of Constantinople, as those of their lawful ruler. Having consented (so Gibbon) "in their own name (i.e. the senate's) and in the name of the people, that the seat of universal empire shall be transferred from Rome to Constantinople."

Before the eastern Emperorship fell (1453) the western was revived in the person of Charlemagne (800), so that for a number of centuries two emperors of the Roman Empire existed, one in the east and the other in the west.

There was no deposition of Irene (who then ruled in the east).

Ample proof is found in the embassies and communications which passed between the western and eastern emperors that no such translation was intended, but that the Imperial dignity was allowed to both divisions.

The quarrels and struggles between these Emperors and the Pope, between them and the disaffected portions of their dominions, etc., accords with the delineations of prophecy, as e.g. Dan. 2:41, 22, 43, and does not interfere with the fact that the Roman Empire enfeebled as it was (and sometimes faintly manifested by weak monarchs), was still represented by a "German Caesar," chosen by an electoral college (Gibbon, vol. 5, p. 70).

Thus, when the eastern part of the empire was overthrown in 1453, the western still survived and continued down uninterruptedly until 1806, to the abdication of Francis II.

Here, then, we have a continuous headship of the Roman Empire existing from the days of Augustus down to A.D. 1806, and in connection with it, descended also from the divided state of the empire, the Papacy with its claims Empire derived.

The divided condition of the empire has been with prophetic writers the chief object of notice while the fact that a headship of the empire existing has been too much ignored.

We are glad to find that the continuity of the roman empire is now advocated by able scholars, as e.g. Bryce in "The Holy Roman Empire," Freeman in "Historical Essays," Essay VI. (also "North Brit. Rev.", March, 1865), Palgrave, Finlay, and others.

Thus Freeman pointedly and justly observes: *"It may seem a hard saying, but it is one which the facts fully bear out, that hardly one student in ten of medieval history really grasps the one key to the whole subject without which medieval history is simply an unintelligible chaos. That key is no other than the continued existence of the Roman Empire. As long as people are taught that the empire came to an end in the year 476, a true understanding of the next thousand years becomes utterly impossible. No man can understand either the politics or the literature of that whole period, unless he constantly bears in mind that, in the ideas of the men of those days, the roman empire, the empire of Augustus, Constantine, and Justinian, was not a thing of the past, but a thing of the present in a word, as we began by saying, the history of the empire is the key to the whole history of medieval Europe, and it is a key which as yet is found in far fewer hands than it ought to be."*

The prophetic student, if solicitous to be historically accurate in tracing historical prophecy, cannot ignore this valuable key. Its reception and use will prevent the adoption of a vast amount of misleading prophetic interpretation.

It would be well if the church, until a better explanation is given, would carefully note the interpretation presented by G.S.Faber in his "Revival of the French Emperorship."

In tracing the Roman Emperorship from Francis II, he is supported both by prophecy and historical fact, and in continuation of the subject we will incorporate his view for the information and consideration of the reader.

Turning to Rev. 17:9-12 we have a delineation of the civil polity (heads) of the same fourth beast (so numerous commentators and writers) described by Daniel 7.

The Revelation speaks of seven forms of government that should exist, and as a source of identification informs us that five of these heads "are fallen," which writers agree in deriving from roman history (Livy, Tacitus, etc.) as follows: (1) Kings, (2) Consuls, (3) Dictators, (4) Decemvirs, (5) Military tribunes. Then John tells us "one is," i.e., that one form of the government was then existing [Caesars].

Now this sixth head of which the prophet speaks, is the Roman Emperorship which, as we have seen under obs.2, continued uninterruptedly from the time of John down to Francis II.

If there is force in historical facts and in the revival of the Emperorship in the western part of the empire before the eastern was overthrown, then Faber's position that this Emperorship continuously existed down to the abdication of Francis II is impregnable.

The views which...overlook the legal unity and uninterrupted historical continuation of the roman Emperorship, for the western Emperorship, or the professed Christian [Holy Roman] Emperorship...[does] not change the unity or legal status and character of the Emperorship, as Faber has historically pointed out.

The simplicity and historical accuracy of Faber's position is thus far incontrovertible...In 1804, two years before the sixth head [Francis II] fell, Napoleon proclaimed the Emperorship of the French, and annexed Rome and the Roman states to be his dominions.

To confirm his power he was crowned an Imperial Head, not only at Paris, but had the pope brought to assist at his coronation.

In Faber's view, the non-existence of the beast [Rev 13:3, 17:11] cannot be established until after the overthrow of the Napoleonic dynasty...[so] if the Napoleonic dynasty is only a continuation of the sixth imperial head with an interval, then this seventh head is still future, and from Rev. 17:8,11 is identified with a period of time (such as now exists) [during which the four beast kingdoms of Dan 7 arose] when the beast is headless, i.e., FOLLOWS IT.

[This view] logically and historically disproves all other theories which do not preserve the unity of the empire in law and the regular historical succession.

It is headless now, no one distinctly claiming to be the imperial head of the empire. But this, according to prophecy, cannot remain thus, a head will be formed and be recognized as that associated with and swaying rule over the empire.

When the kingdom of Messiah is to be manifested, the prophets teach that this Roman Empire is to exist in its broken, divided form and yet sufficiently united under the leadership of the 1st head of the same to form a most powerful combination against the true believers.

Hence the efforts made in some directions to find the Antichrist...outside of the Roman Empire is utterly opposed to the fundamental requirements of prophecy.

Prophecy describes the fourth empire; runs it down consecutively to the time of the end; portrays its commingling of weakness and strength after its division; informs us that out of it shall arise the last confederation against Christ; associates the head of the last combination with this same identical beast or empire; and thus fixes our attention, not to outside nations or governments, but to the empire itself for the rise, progress, and terrible career of the last head.

Every effort to call away the attention of believers from the roman to some other power as the head around whom the Antichristian forces shall gather, is insofar a departure from the plain truth, no matter how plausibly represented or ingeniously portrayed.

On this point we must come back to the position universally occupied by the early Church, viz., that the Antichristian power, the last head of the beast, the oppressing power which shall culminate just previous to the establishment of Messiah's kingdom and the ushering in of the millennial age, must arise in and be fully identified with, the Roman Empire.

Any other outside power, like Russia, etc., could only become such provided it became incorporated with, as an integral part of, the empire, and thus would become its acknowledged head.

It is not sufficient to base an opinion on the words, "Gog and Magog" etc., of Ezekiel, unless it also be shown that Russia is, at the time of the end, an essential part of the Roman empire.

For what prophecy in its direct historical development demands, is some roman power on the territory of the empire, who thus culminates, etc. Now, Russia can only become this last head, if directly incorporated, by conquest or confederation, as a part of the restored empire. Isolated as at present, with a vast territory beyond the limits of the fourth empire, etc., it has, as yet none of the distinguishing characteristics requisite for a complete identity."

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